

Comrade of Castro, Citing Disillusion, Gets U.S. Asylum

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MIAMI — A veteran Cuban revolutionary, disillusioned by Cuba's economic stagnation and frustrated by its bureaucracy, has quickly defected to the United States, it has been learned.

The defector is Ismael Suarez de la Paz, a comrade-in-arms of Premier Fidel Castro since the early 1950s, and a one-time provisional national coordinator for Castro's 26th of July movement.

Suarez, a wiry, intense man of 49 with a reputation as a superb salesman, represented a small Cuban trading enterprise on the French island of Martinique. As such, he was the only Cuban official of diplomatic rank stationed in the Caribbean.

In late June, Suarez reached Puerto Rico in a small boat with his wife and two young sons. He carried with him a letter requesting political asylum.

U.S. Admits Family

This week, after an exhaustive background check showed Suarez had never worked for Cuba's intelligence service or any repressive arm of the Castro government, he and his family were formally admitted into the United States as refugees.

The defection is the first of political consequence since Orlando Castro Hidalgo, an intelligence operative assigned to the Cuban Embassy in Paris, sought asylum a year ago.

"It is not an easy thing, to leave after serving a cause for 18 years," Suarez said in an interview. "But in the last two years I lost my faith in the revolution. I don't believe the revolution is the solution for Cuba."

According to Suarez, it has become increasingly evident that Cuba's economic problems far exceed the ability of the Castro government to meet them.

"This year was to have been the turning point, the climactic year for the revolution, where improvement would be evident," he said. "Instead, the figures show production deficits of 20 to 40 percent across the board. After 10 years, there is no solution of the necessities of the people. Instead of an improvement there has been a deterioration."

"I don't believe in the present leadership."

Suarez has supported the Cuban revolution since March 10, 1952, the day dictator Fulgencio Batista seized power.

National Coordinator

Suarez joined the 26th of July Movement at its inception.

From 1957 to 1958 he supervised the collection and distribution of supplies for the movement, then led by Castro from the Sierra Maestra. In the summer of 1958 Suarez spent two months in the mountains. ("I did not participate in combat.")

In September 1958, he assumed the title of provisional national coordinator of the 26th of July Movement.

Following Castro's triumph in January 1959, Suarez, then known as "Captain Echemendia," was second in command of militia irregulars in Havana. He left the army forces that same month to begin an 11-year career as a civilian government official.

Last year, he became commercial representative in Martinique, where his job was to promote Cuban trade with French dependencies in the Caribbean.

Point of No Return

Suarez said the revolution passed the economic point of no return this year, and that change within the Cuban leadership appears inevitable.

"At this point the country will demand a change, whether it wants to or not. I don't want to sound like a prophet, but a solution will have to come—from somewhere," Suarez said.

"I believe the prime minister and his closest advisers would be doing a great service to their country, and for their own place in history, if they stepped down in favor of new men capable of earning the confidence of the Cuban people."

"There are such men in Cuba today," Suarez said.
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